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Emmaus man visits guerrillas

Backs overthrow of Nicaraguan regime

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An Emmaus college student and journalist says he saw "little evidence" of American military support for the guerrilla effort to overthrow the government of Nicaragua during a week he spent with the guerrillas.

Mike Johns, the 19-year-old editor-in-chief of the University of Miami Tribune and a president of the university's College Republicans, will relate his experiences to a national TV audience on the NBC Today show about 7:30 a.m. today.

Johns does not recognize the legitimacy of the regime that rules Nicaragua and wants the guerrillas to topple it because, he claims, the regime is dictatorial and communistic.

In a telephone interview with The Morning Call yesterday, Johns said that he was told by guerrilla leaders in Honduras that their numbers are growing by 1,000 a month, and now number 11,000 fighting troops. He said their morale is "extremely high" and he expects they may take control of Nicaragua before the end of the year.

Johns said he saw no CIA personnel, no American C rations, clothing, weapons or training during his stay and that the guerrillas told him they get none. Communications equipment seemed to be the only American materiel.

"It is totally a grass roots type of freedom fight. They want their country back and seem to be enjoying an enormous amount of support from Nicaraguan and Honduran civilians and Sandinista troops," Johns said.

He said the guerrilla fighters report that some Nicaraguan army troops purposely shoot over their heads because they sympathize with the guerrillas and really do not

want to kill them, but are conscripted and forced to fight by the Nicaraguan government.

Johns made the trip with Mike Waller, the editor-in-chief of The Sequent, a conservative campus newspaper in Washington D.C. They were sponsored by the Young America's Foundation, which Johns said is a nonpolitical, nonpartisan educational organization.

He said the CIA was informed of their visit, but did not necessarily approve it. He said there was no federal endorsement of what they were doing, "like any other journalists."

Johns and Waller had been planning to make such a visit since September. Both knew Adolfo Calero, the commander-in-chief of the Nicaraguan Democratic Front, the largest of the several "contra" rebel groups fighting the Sandinista government from bases along the Honduran border. It was through Calero that their trip was arranged.

After flying from Miami Jan. 7, the two spent two days at an FDN "safe house" outside Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. It was a plain, two-story house where communications equipment was kept and from where the guerrilla effort was coordinated.

They were then taken to the Las Vegas base camp, the largest of the FDN camps, about four miles from the Nicaraguan border. Johns said they had to promise not to tell about the trip to and from the base camp. From Tuesday to Saturday they were with the guerrillas.

He said roughly 960 of them were at the camp, virtually all Nicaraguans. He said about 40 of them were women and about 20 percent were youths under 16 years old. He said about 30 percent of the soldiers were ex-Sandinistas who fought to overthrow the Somoza regime in 1979. Others were former members of Somoza's national guard. He noted that former Somoza guardsmen are also in the Sandinista government and military.

He said the guerrillas acted toward him and Waller as if they had never seen Yankees, poking at

John's blond hair and examining their recording gear.

He said the guerrillas appeared to be proud soldiers. Every day they woke at dawn, grouped into formation, raised the Nicaraguan flag, sang the national anthem and fired a salute.

All dinners consisted of fried bananas, rice, beans and taco-like corn shells.

The guerrillas spent the day in a loose regimen of training, firing weapons and being schooled in democratic, free enterprise principles. Johns spoke to the guerrillas on one occasion and told them Americans are supporting them.

He said the guerrillas' main strategy for overthrowing the Nicaraguan government seems to be to gain control of small areas of Nicaragua and give the people freedom — instituting a free market system, for example. Guerrillas strike at military targets mainly from camps inside Nicaragua, he said.

Johns said while he was in the camp there was one only attack by the enemy, a few mortar rounds that did little damage. He said two days before they arrived, he was told, Nicaraguan troops attacked during the morning ceremonies, but the guerrillas chased them. The final count was 20 army dead and two guerrillas dead. He said two Cubans were among the dead Nicaraguan army troops.

Johns said the guerrillas seemed to be well-trained. He was told the kill ratio between the army and guerrillas was about 12-1 in favor of the guerrillas.

He accompanied the guerrillas on an excursion into Nicaragua, where the peasants offered them food.

He had his closest brush with what could have been death occurred when the jeep that was taking them back broke down and they had to walk a distance. They were in the area where the American helicopter had been shot down and the pilot killed. Johns said the guerrilla commander told them not to talk and to be ready to dive for cover in the ditch to the right of the road because the Sandinista army was in the mountains to the left. "It was very scary."